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W.M. (39)

104th Conclusions.

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**WAR CABINET 104 (39).**

*CONCLUSIONS of a Meeting of the War Cabinet held at 10 Downing Street, S.W. 1, on Tuesday, December 5, 1939, at 11.30 A.M.*

Present :

The Right Hon. NEVILLE CHAMBERLAIN, M.P., Prime Minister ( <i>in the Chair</i> ).	
The Right Hon. VISCOUNT HALIFAX, Secretary of State for Foreign Affairs.	Admiral of the Fleet the Right Hon. LORD CHATFIELD, Minister for Co- ordination of Defence.
The Right Hon. WINSTON S. CHURCHILL, M.P., First Lord of the Admiralty.	The Right Hon. L. HORE-BELISHA, M.P., Secretary of State for War.
The Right Hon. Sir KINGSLEY WOOD, M.P., Secretary of State for Air.	The Right Hon. Sir SAMUEL HOARE, Bt., M.P., Lord Privy Seal.
The Right Hon. LORD HANKEY, Minister without Portfolio.	

The following were also present :

The Right Hon. Sir JOHN ANDERSON, M.P., Secretary of State for the Home Department and Minister of Home Security.	The Right Hon. ANTHONY EDEN, M.P., Secretary of State for Dominion Affairs.
Air Chief Marshal Sir CYRIL L. N. NEWALL, Chief of the Air Staff.	Admiral of the Fleet Sir DUDLEY POUND, First Sea Lord and Chief of Naval Staff.
Major-General H. R. S. MASSY, Deputy Chief of the Imperial General Staff.	

*Secretariat.*

Sir EDWARD BRIDGES.  
Major-General H. L. ISMAY.  
Captain A. D. NICHOLL, R.N.  
Mr. W. D. WILKINSON.  
Lieutenant-Colonel V. DYKES, R.E.  
Wing Commander W. ELLIOT.

# WAR CABINET 104 (39).

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**The Air Situation.**

(Previous  
Reference:  
W.M. (39) 103rd  
Conclusions,  
Minute 1.)

1. *The Secretary of State for Air* said that there was no special activity to report. One enemy aircraft had been detected in the Thames Estuary and one in the Firth of Forth on the previous evening, which were suspected of being engaged in mine-laying.

The War Cabinet took note of the above statement.

**The Naval Situation.**

H.M.S. *Nelson*.  
(Previous  
Reference:  
W.M. (39) 103rd  
Conclusions,  
Minute 2.)

2. *The First Lord of the Admiralty* gave the War Cabinet information regarding the dispositions of the Fleet, and also further information in regard to the damage sustained by H.M.S. *Nelson* by a magnetic mine. Fifty-two men had been injured, 9 of them seriously. A number of compartments were flooded, and there were a number of leaks in other compartments. A salvage vessel had been sent from Liverpool to assist in pumping operations, which were beyond the capacity of *Nelson's* pumps. The Commander-in-Chief did not feel any great anxiety for the safety of the ship. Unlike the case of H.M.S. *Belfast*, where the effect of the mine explosion had caused fractures to machinery throughout the ship, the effects of the explosion in H.M.S. *Nelson* appeared to be local. As soon as the leakage was under control, it was hoped that she would be able to proceed to dock under her own steam. A strong Destroyer escort would be provided.

A British collier had been sunk by a mine.

The steamship *Eskdene* (4,000 tons), which, as previously reported, had been mined, was still afloat, and it was hoped to get her safely to port.

The *Manchester Regiment* (6,000 tons), outward bound from Canada in a convoy, had been sunk as a result of a collision with another ship in the convoy.

A German submarine had been attacked in Liverpool Bay without known result.

With reference to the attack made on a U-boat off St. Catherine's (reported at the previous meeting), it had been thought that this U-boat was endeavouring to pass eastward through the Straits of Dover. On the previous morning a mine in the Dover barrage had exploded at the time at which it was estimated that this submarine would have reached the barrage. There was, therefore, good grounds for hoping that she had been destroyed.

The War Cabinet took note of the above statements.

**Magnetic Mines.**

(Previous  
Reference:  
W.M. (39) 103rd  
Conclusions,  
Minute 2.)

3. *The First Lord of the Admiralty* said that consideration had been given to the Prime Minister's suggestion that the investigations into the possibilities of rendering ships immune from magnetic mines should not be confined to scientists employed by the Government. The Admiralty had reached the conclusion that, at any rate for the time being, it would be better not to consult "outside" scientists, on the grounds that the theoretic aspects of the problem were known, but that a solution depended on their practical application. A special Sub-Committee of experts had been set up to deal with this particular aspect, as it had been thought undesirable in any way to interrupt the work of the experts engaged on the experiments on the sweeping for, or destruction of, magnetic mines. If, after, say, a fortnight, no satisfactory results had been achieved, it might be necessary to broaden the scope of the investigation.

*The Secretary of State for Foreign Affairs* suggested that it might be desirable to keep "outside" scientists in touch with the



progress of the Admiralty's investigations, in order that they might be aware of the position if, at a later stage, it was decided to call on their services.

*The First Lord of the Admiralty* agreed to do this.

*The Prime Minister* asked whether the French were engaged on the same problems and whether they had also succeeded in sweeping up any of the magnetic mines.

*The First Lord of the Admiralty* said that the French had sent experts over to this country. They had not so far swept up any of the mines, and they were obtaining all their information from us.

*The Minister without Portfolio* suggested that one of the reasons why the Germans scuttled their ships might be to prevent us from learning the secrets of the antidote to the magnetic mine with which their merchant ships were possibly fitted.

*The First Lord of the Admiralty* said that he would follow up this possibility in the case of the prizes which had been brought in.

The War Cabinet took note of the above statements.

#### Naval Commands.

Changes in  
certain Naval  
appointments.

4. *The First Lord of the Admiralty* informed the War Cabinet of certain changes in higher Naval appointments, and the reasons why they had been made. Admiral Plunkett-Erle-Drax had succeeded Admiral Brownrigg as Commander-in-Chief of the Nore; Vice-Admiral Royle had succeeded Vice-Admiral Ramsay as Fifth Sea Lord and Chief of the Naval Air Services; Rear-Admiral Watson, Rear-Admiral (Submarines), had been succeeded by Vice-Admiral Horton; Admiral French, the Admiral Commanding the Orkneys and Shetlands, who was on the retired list, was being relieved by two Flag Officers on the active list.

Under the changed conditions of war the Board of Admiralty had considered that the above changes, which had been made with a view to intensifying the Navy's driving power in the prosecution of the war, were necessary. In the case of the Command of the Submarine Service, for example, Rear-Admiral Watson was not a submarine specialist; and, while in peace-time it was the accepted policy to fill senior technical appointments from time to time with officers who had not specialised in that particular branch, it was most desirable that in war-time the senior officer of a Service such as that of submarines should be a specialist. The officers who had been relieved had all accepted the situation in the best possible spirit.

The War Cabinet took note of this statement.

#### The Military Situation.

(Previous  
Reference:  
W.M. (39) 103rd  
Conclusions,  
Minute 4.)

5. *The Secretary of State for War* said that the situation on the Western Front remained unchanged.

The War Cabinet took note of the above statement.

#### Finland.

Invasion by  
Soviet Union.  
(Previous  
Reference:  
W.M. (39) 103rd  
Conclusions,  
Minute 6.)

6. *The Secretary of State for Air* said that 16-20 Russian aircraft had been brought down by the Finns during the past three days. The Finns had lost two aircraft. There had been 200-250 civilian casualties to date in bombing raids on Helsinki and Viborg alone.

*The Secretary of State for War* said that heavy snow had interfered with land and air operations in Finland. The Soviet claimed to have captured Salmi, but the Finns also claimed to have

captured 1,500 Russian prisoners in the same area. There was no further news of the reported Russian movement against Suomussalmi. Press reports emphasised the inefficient administrative arrangements of the Russian troops, who were alleged in some cases to have had no rations for three days.

The War Cabinet took note of the above statement.

#### Finland.

Proposed supply  
of Fighter  
Aircraft.  
(Previous  
Reference:  
W.M. (39) 103rd  
Conclusions,  
Minute 7.)

7. *The Secretary of State for Air* said that, in view of the manifest desire of the War Cabinet at their last meeting to go some way to meet Finland's request for fighter aircraft, the question had been very carefully examined in the Air Ministry. The Air Staff felt that, from the purely military point of view, there was no case for supplying Finland with fighters, since we had insufficient for our own needs. Nevertheless they appreciated that, from the wider point of view, it would be very desirable to give Finland some assistance, and they therefore proposed that 20 Gladiators should be supplied. The War Cabinet must realise, however, that in making this offer we were running a certain risk ourselves. These aircraft would have to be crated and sent by sea.

*The First Lord of the Admiralty* pointed out that it would be necessary to consider very carefully the route by which these aircraft were shipped, otherwise they might fall into the hands of our enemies.

*The Secretary of State for Dominion Affairs* said that when he had mentioned this question to Dominion High Commissioners the previous day, the South African High Commissioner had immediately offered to make over to Finland some of the obsolescent fighters which were being purchased by the Union from the Air Ministry. He understood that the Air Staff view was that these aircraft would not be of a sufficiently modern type to compete with the Russian bombers, but no doubt the War Cabinet would wish to express their appreciation of this offer of assistance by South Africa.

In discussion it was explained that, in order to avoid legal difficulties over the supply of munitions to a belligerent Power by the Government, the supply of these 20 Gladiators to Finland would have to be carried out as a commercial transaction between the manufacturers and the Finnish Government. The aircraft which now belonged to the Air Ministry would therefore have to be made over to the manufacturers. The necessary detailed arrangements would be made with the Finnish Minister by the Air Ministry.

#### The War Cabinet—

- (i) Approved the proposal of the Air Ministry to supply 20 Gladiator aircraft to Finland.
- (ii) Invited the Air Ministry to make the detailed arrangements with the Finnish Minister in London for the supply and shipment of the aircraft, and to consult the Admiralty regarding the route to be taken by the ships carrying them.
- (iii) Took note that this transaction would take the form of a sale by the manufacturers to the Finnish Government.
- (iv) Invited the Secretary of State for Dominion Affairs to inform the High Commissioner for the Union of South Africa that the offer of aircraft made by the Union was deeply appreciated, and that, if the aircraft in question had been of a suitable type, this offer would no doubt have been gratefully accepted.



**Eire.**

Intelligence  
Organisation.  
(Previous  
Reference:  
W.M. (39) 92nd  
Conclusions,  
Minute 6.)

8. *The Minister without Portfolio* gave the War Cabinet an account of the stage reached in the enquiry he had been asked to conduct into the arrangements for Intelligence in Eire, and ended by saying that he would shortly submit a final Report. A record of the Minister's statement is given in the Secretary's Standard File of War Cabinet Conclusions.

*The First Lord of the Admiralty* expressed his gratitude for the very thorough investigation which had been carried out by the Minister.

The War Cabinet took note of the Interim Report made by the Minister without Portfolio.

**Italy.**

(Previous  
Reference:  
W.M. (39) 103rd  
Conclusions,  
Minute 10.)

9. *The Secretary of State for Foreign Affairs* drew attention to telegrams Nos. 369 and 370, dated the 1st December, from His Majesty's Ambassador in Rome. The former reported the account which Sir Percy Loraine had given, in reply to a question by Count Ciano, of the state of opinion in the United Kingdom as regards the war. The latter recorded a conversation which Sir Percy Loraine had had with the Polish Ambassador in Rome. The Ambassador, who a month ago had been suspicious of the ulterior motives of the Italian Government, had now reached a more favourable conclusion.

The War Cabinet took note of the above statement.

**Turkey.**

Probable attitude in the event of an invasion of Roumania by U.S.S.R.  
(Previous  
Reference:  
W.M. (39) 85th  
Conclusions,  
Minute 7.)

10. *The Secretary of State for Foreign Affairs* drew attention to telegram No. 790 from Angora, dated the 2nd December, recording a conversation between Sir Hughe Knatchbull-Hugessen and the Turkish Minister for Foreign Affairs. The latter thought an attempt by the Soviet Government to seize Bessarabia quite possible, and did not anticipate resistance by Roumania. If Roumania did not resist, he expected the matter would not go further, in which case, according to the Minister, not much harm would have been done. The matter would be worse if Roumania resisted. He intended to keep Moscow in doubt as to the Turkish attitude in the event of a Russian threat to Roumania. Even over Bessarabia he did not think that Russia could move without previously taking steps to ascertain the Turkish attitude. In the event of Turkey being approached in this way, he would at once consult His Majesty's Government.

On the other hand, the Roumanian Minister in London, whom he (the Foreign Secretary) had seen the previous day, was of the opinion that the Turks would consider themselves threatened if Russia attacked Bessarabia.

The Foreign Office inclined to the view that Turkey would not consider her interests vitally affected by an invasion of Bessarabia, but would do so if a Russia invasion threatened the mouths of the Danube or Roumania's Black Sea ports.

The Foreign Secretary said that, if possible, he would attempt to get an indication of the Turkish Government's view from the Secretary-General of the Turkish Foreign Office, who was at present in London.

The War Cabinet took note of the above statement.